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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [MASS](#) [SOCI](#) [CS](#)
SUBJECT: COSTA RICA: FIRST U.S. NAVY OFFICIAL SHIP VISIT IN
NINE YEARS HIGHLIGHTS IMPORTANCE OF JOINT MARITIME EFFORTS

REF: A. SAN JOSE 003
[1](#)B. SAN JOSE 800

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SUMMARY:
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[1](#)1. (SBU) From November 19-22, the USS Underwood (FFG-36) visited the Pacific coast port of Golfito, making the first official port call by a USN warship to Costa Rica in nine years. The Ambassador led an Embassy-supported VIP visit to the ship on November 21, which included members of the national legislature, officials from the Ministry of Public Security, and local politicians. Our goal with the VIPs, which included some legislators critical of U.S. ship visits and CN operations, was to clarify that U.S. vessels, whether Coast Guard or Navy, perform similar law enforcement missions under the bilateral maritime agreement with Costa Rica.

[1](#)2. (SBU) This highly successful visit should smooth the way for similar ship visits and operations in the future, since any visit by an "armed" vessel must be approved in advance by the Costa Rican legislature. The test will come over the next two weeks as the legislature debates (and hopefully approves quickly) the list of USCG and USN vessels that may visit Costa Rica or operate in Costa Rican waters on law enforcement operations in the next six months. In the past, heated debate about U.S. Navy "warships" visiting "peaceful Costa Rica" has sometimes delayed approval and canceled some joint operations (although the USCG visit list usually has been approved quickly). Meanwhile, joint maritime cooperation between the U.S. and Costa Rica in 2008 thus far has interdicted more than 12 tons of cocaine. The positive political and public relations value of this type of visit cannot be overstated. The Embassy is deeply appreciative of the outstanding work of the Underwood and her crew in support of Mission and USG objectives. END SUMMARY.

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FIRST, WIN OVER THE COMMUNITY
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[1](#)3. (U) On November 19, the USS Underwood docked at the Pacific port of Golfito, Costa Rica, to begin a 3-day official port call. The ship, with a crew of over 200, is an Oliver Hazard Perry Class frigate that is conducting joint law enforcement operations in the eastern Pacific under the

terms of the U.S.-Costa Rica Joint Maritime Agreement.

¶4. (U) As part of the official visit by the USS Underwood, 25 officers and crew members volunteered their liberty time on November 20 to do community service in the Golfito area. They made carpentry repairs to a classroom at a local elementary school; repainted the interior of the municipal library; and delivered hygienic products to residents at an elder hospice. The Golfito community was genuinely grateful for the assistance, with some residents of the hospice tearing up with joy as a result of the sailors' help.

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THEN, EDUCATE THE LAWMAKERS

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¶5. (U) As part of the November 21 VIP visit, nine legislators from Costa Rica's national assembly toured the USS Underwood and were encouraged to ask questions about the unique law enforcement aspects of its mission in Costa Rican waters. (Post used SOUTHCOM Traditional Commander's Activities (TCA) funding to charter the aircraft to bring the legislators from San Jose to Golfito.) The ship's captain, Commander Wesley Smith, and Embassy personnel explained to the legislators the strict law enforcement mission of the USN ship and its embarked USCG Law Enforcement Detachment while it was patrolling in Costa Rican waters. Visitors also viewed a mock boarding of a small fishing vessel by the USCG boarding team, which including a Shiprider from the Costa Rica coast guard, who was onboard for counternarcotics and law enforcement purposes.

¶6. (SBU) After the ship tour, Post's Office of Defense Representative (ODR) staff, led by USCG Commander Mark Camacho, gave a detailed briefing on the U.S.-Costa Rica bilateral maritime agreement highlighting that:

-- the agreement permits "Shipriders" (Costa Rican law enforcement authorities) to be aboard U.S. ships to help conduct operations against drug trafficking suspects in Costa Rican national waters or international waters. (A former Shiprider actually gave the GOCR portion of the presentation to the legislators);

-- the agreement also permits U.S. authorities to be aboard Costa Rican vessels to advise how to approach and pursue vessels suspected of drug trafficking; and

-- when necessary, the agreement permits U.S. vessels to pursue and detain suspects while waiting for the Costa Rican authorities to arrive on the scene. The GOCR retains the sole legal authority to take suspects into custody and seize properties in its territorial waters.

¶7. (SBU) To clarify further for the legislators, we briefed that ship boardings could only be conducted by authorized law enforcement personnel (USCG) aboard the USN assets, and that no member of the Department of Defense (usually Navy) could participate in boarding operations (except in a supporting role operating the small craft used for boarding), detain suspects or seize of drugs. To simplify the issue for the legislators, we described USN assets as essentially "taxis" for our USCG teams to use, since our Coast Guard does not have enough cutters to conduct all of the international law enforcement missions required of them.

¶8. (SBU) Finally, we highlighted to the legislators the current relevance of getting the next ship list approved as soon as possible, since the existing six-month permission expired November 30. We also noted that last year, four ships were not able to conduct port visits due to delayed permission from the legislature, which meant a million dollars of lost revenue to the local economy (including fuel and tourism purchases, port fees, etc.). Fuel purchases alone total nearly \$150,000 of each ship visit, and there have been 8-9 such visits annually (up to now only by the USCG), over the last two years.

¶9. (SBU) All of the legislators (listed in para 14 below) thanked us for the detailed briefing and asked several questions. Most questions and comments focused on concerns that every boarding operation should include a Costa Rican Shiprider. We agreed that this was preferable, but logistically speaking it is nearly impossible due to the Costa Rican coast guard's limited manpower. Also, the bilateral maritime agreement allows USCG-only boarding, as noted in paragraph five above. (NOTE: A few days after the VIP visit, we received a letter from Federico Tinoco, one of the legislators in attendance and Chairman of the Counternarcotics Committee, underlining this Costa Rican concern. The letter charged the GOCR with "redoubling its efforts" to participate with the U.S. so more Costa Rican shipriders could be trained. END NOTE)

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DON'T FORGET THE MEDIA
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¶10. (U) Since nine years had passed since the last official USN ship visit, there was significant media interest in the USS Underwood. Local correspondents spent two full days providing coverage of all activities that took place during the visit. Reporters also participated in the tour of the ship given to legislators and members of the Ministry of Public Security.

¶11. (U) Media coverage came from various print, radio, and TV stations, including: Radio Colosal (a local Golfito station); Costa Rica's most-read daily Diario Extra; and TV channels 6 and 42. Radio Colosal interviewed Post's Information Officer and ODR representative, focusing on the purpose of the ship

visit and details of the community service projects. Channel 6 broadcast a two-minute report on their Saturday (November 22) evening news, featuring the details and structure of the USS Underwood as well as the significance of the bilateral maritime agreement. They also reported on the Shiprider program and how law enforcement boardings are conducted.

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COMMENT
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¶12. (SBU) The positive political implications of this visit cannot be overstated. It was 18 months in the making (since a similar, highly-publicized VIP visit to a USCG cutter in Golfito in January 2007), and capped a number of briefings to anti-US legislators (and quiet collusion with their pro-US counterparts). Costa Rica's hyper-legalistic political system and the anti-military, pro-disarmament views of the government and society often made it very difficult to provide military assistance here in the past. As Reftels illustrate, challenges remain, even when providing humanitarian assistance, and we should proceed carefully, but the Underwood's visit illustrates how far we have come. The willing participation of skeptical, often-critical legislators from the main opposition party (the PAC) was critical to provide them a clear understanding of the USN's "role" in law enforcement. We believe they now grasp the nuance that whether from a USCG cutter or a USN warship, it is always a law enforcement team that conducts boardings and the actual hands on searches, seizures and arrests under the bilateral maritime agreement with Costa Rica.

¶13. (U) We would like to sincerely thank the captain and crew of the USS Underwood, who made this landmark visit so successful. Their community work and patient "education" of key Costa Rican legislators reflected great credit upon themselves and the United States Navy. This was an outstanding example of "haze gray diplomacy." Well done!
END COMMENT.

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THE PARTICIPATING LEGISLATORS
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¶14. (U) The following members of the National Assembly joined the Ambassador and Minister of Public Security Del Vecchio for the VIP visit to the Underwood. We were careful to invite all the Assembly's leadership and head of factions. Notably, the loudest and most radical US critics declined. Those participating included:

- Evita Arguedas (Independent), member of the International Relations Committee;
- Jose Manuel Echandi (Independent), member of the CN Committee;
- Saturnino Fonseca (PLN); member of the CN Committee;
- Olivier Jimenez (National Liberation Party-PLN), local member for Golfito;
- Guyon Massey (National Restoration Party), 2nd Secretary of the Assembly
- Olivier Perez (Citizen Action Party-PAC), member of the CN Committee;
- Sandra Quesada (PLN), 1st Assistant Secretary of the Assembly and member of the CN Committee (who had never visited Golfito before, another fringe benefit of this event);
- Marvin Rojas (PAC), member and former Chairman of the CN Committee; and
- Federico Tinoco (PLN), Chairman of the CN Committee.

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